

# HEROIN AND OTHER OPIATES

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Heroin comes from the family of drugs known as opiates, or narcotics. The family includes useful drugs such as morphine and codeine. It also includes the illicit drug, opium. Opiates, derived from the resin of the seed pod of the Asian poppy plant, are processed into any number of forms, including liquid, crystals, and powder.

Heroin, the opiate most commonly sold on the streets, is usually processed into a white or brown powder. It is often mixed (or “cut”) with another powder to reduce its potency and to increase the profits of the dealer. The powder can be inhaled (“snorted”) or ingested (“eaten”), and smoked but most common route of administration is intravenous injection.

Addicts often share needles, spreading diseases such as hepatitis and the virus that causes AIDS. Over half of all new HIV infections occur among injecting drug users and their sexual partners, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA).

The legal opiates, such as morphine and codeine, also are abused. Their use is tightly controlled, as is the use of synthetic versions such as meperidine (sold under the brand name Demerol).

### ▼ What It Does

Heroin and other opiates are powerful and effective painkillers. They “kill” pain by blocking pain recognition by the brain. This property makes morphine and codeine useful as a “pain blocker” in medical use. The actions of opiates, though, leads to psychological dependence and physical addiction.

The addiction causes a craving that many addicts are willing to sacrifice any and everything to satisfy, including engaging in risky behavior, such as unprotected sex and acts of violence. They may neglect their health and basic needs, such as nutrition.

Addiction can take place after just one use. When the high wears off, an addict may experience panic or paranoia. They may have insomnia and be physically ill. Withdrawal from heroin and other opiates can be extremely painful. In some cases, addicts are given a lesser form of opiate known as methadone to ease them through the withdrawal phase.

An overdose of heroin or other opiates can cause sudden death. The drugs suppress the heart rate and breathing and can cause stroke or heart attack.

Along with the risk of hepatitis and the virus that causes AIDS, addicts who inject heroin also suffer from skin abscesses, inflamed or collapsed veins, tetanus, and a cardiac disease caused by a bacterium passed from one needle-user to another. There also is the danger that the drug was mixed with an unsafe substance, such as rat poison or soap powder.

Heroin and other opiate use during pregnancy can lead to the death of the unborn child or miscarriage. Babies can be born addicted to the drugs that pass from their mothers’ systems to theirs. Along with having to go through withdrawal, these babies often experience developmental disabilities.

## ▼ More Information

For more information on heroin and other opiates, visit the websites of the National Institute on Drug Abuse ([www.drugabuse.org](http://www.drugabuse.org)) and the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment ([www.samhsa.gov/centers/csat/csat.html](http://www.samhsa.gov/centers/csat/csat.html)).



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